



Advocating for women's rights
and opportunities in Connecticut

***Judiciary Committee Hearing
Public Testimony in Support of S. B. No. 1157 (RAISED) An Act Concerning Funding For Legal
Services And Judicial Branch Technology
Submitted by Amy Miller, Program & Public Policy Director,
Connecticut Women's Education and Legal Fund
March 26, 2009***

My name is Amy Miller and I am the Program & Public Policy Director of the Connecticut Women's Education & Legal Fund (CWEALF). CWEALF is a statewide non-profit organization dedicated to empowering women, girls and their families to achieve equal opportunities in their personal and professional lives. Thank you for this opportunity to submit testimony in support of *S.B No. 1157 An Act Concerning Funding for Legal Services and Judicial Branch Technology*.

Before you this year are critical and difficult budget decisions. Some of the budget cut decisions you make will address problems for the short-term while others will have long-term implications. I argue that by not providing adequate funding to legal service programs will contribute to continued strains on Connecticut's infrastructure tomorrow as well as long into the future. While it is difficult to implement new taxes, it is important that you continue your support of legal services programs to ensure economic stability for individuals, communities, and agencies.

Our relationship with legal services occurs on multiple levels. CWEALF provides legal information and referrals on family, employment, education and civil rights law. Our Information and Referral (I&R) Service frequently receives phone calls that are referred from legal services. From the thousands of calls we receive annually, more than 15% of them have been referred from legal services. Often the people they refer to us do not qualify for their services due to their incomes. However, *many individuals do qualify, but because they are already underfunded, legal service programs must make difficult decisions on who is perceived as the most in need of their services.*

In order to maximize their resources, legal services is a generous collaborator. They recognize that the more they share their knowledge and expertise, the better they can meet the needs of those they will not be able to represent. They have excellent written materials which explain to individuals their legal rights in custody, child support, modifying orders, addressing housing issues, etc. Our organization uses these publications almost daily to send to the individuals who contact our program. Besides the written materials, they annually host a Poverty Law conference for social service agencies, which my staff consistently attends. The information provided at this conference is valuable to the community and helps local agencies understand the impact of legal issues their clients face and better prepare them to case manage the situations. Additionally, legal services staff have provided trainings on topics such as SSI & SSD to our staff when we recognized a growing need for this type of information.

When we look to reduce costs we identify the ways in which we can cut waste, stream-line processes and avoid duplication of services. Legal service programs have already done all of these measures and more. By representing individuals, they reduce strain on the court system. By being advocates in the system they identify ways to navigate systems more efficiently. And by collaborating with organizations they strengthen communities throughout the state. For these and many more reasons, I strongly urge you to financially support legal service programs through such solutions as in SB 1157 to ensure equitable access to the court for low-income people in Connecticut.